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Is a United Church Possible Now?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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Is a United Church Possible Now?

MR. BORIN: As we look at the organization of the Christian Church today two facts stand out: First, Christian unity is still an accepted part of the Christian ideal. Second, the Church is divided into over 250 denominations. This paradox puzzles the ordinary church-goers and plagues the theologian sincerely interested in a more influential church.

To discuss the possibility of church unity now we hear by transcription from Dr. Van Dusen, President of Union Theological Seminary.

MR. VAN DUSEN: "Our century has its sad features. But there is one feature in its history which is not sad. That is the gathering tide of Christian union." These words, quoted from the distinguished British political scientist, Sir Ernest Barker of Cambridge University, might well serve as a text for this discussion. They summarize a fact of which most people are only dimly aware.

Many Divisions

Of course, the ideal of Christian unity is as old as Christianity itself. Ever since the Apostle Paul likened the Church to a body, with many members differing in character but functioning in organic interdependence, Christians have spoken of the Church as the Body of Christ, and have believed that it should be one. But, in fact, the life of the Christian churches has been marked by a steady succession of schisms and divisions until they have produced the present shocking total of over 250 denominations in the United States alone. In brief, for nearly 1900 years the practice of Christians in this matter of Christian

unity almost precisely contradicted their profession.

Then, about 150 years ago, a reverse tendency began quietly to set in. Sir Ernest Barker's figure of the tide is well chosen. It has been as though powerful surface currents which had been separating Christians for eighteen centuries into ever more numerous and mutually antagonistic churches had given place to deep undersurface tides which, all through this past century and a half, have been drawing these same churches, except the Church of Rome, closer and closer together. Today the greater part of the leadership of non-Roman Catholic Christendom is more fully united in understanding and mutual trust, in fellowship and organization for common action than has been true of Christianity at any previous time in its history.

'Christian Unity Advancing'

The tidal movement of Christian unity has been advancing in two complementary directions at the same time. On the one hand, through actual unions of churches, not only local congregations, but great national church bodies; and, on the other hand, through the creation of councils and federations in which different denominations join forces in united work. Two pairs of contrasts may convey some impression of how unprecedented both of these developments have been.

The first eighteen centuries of Christian history witnessed at least one, new major permanent schism in the Church in each century; since the Reformation, scores in each century. Those centuries achieved exactly one

instance of church union, a reunion of two separated branches of the Catholic Church. The past hundred and fifty years have seen some new denominations come to birth; but, much more significant, they have been marked by hundreds of unions of individual congregations and also nearly a hundred full and permanent mergers of national denominations. Some of these, like the United Churches of Canada, China, South and North India, the Philippines and Japan, have joined Communions which had been separated from each other since the Reformation. In the first 1800 years, one church union; in the last 150 years, scores! That is the first contrast.

Many Unions

The second contrast is this. Up to almost 1800, there was, so far as we know, not a single organization, in a local community or in a nation, let alone on a world scale, which united Christians of different denominations across denominational lines for common action or even for fellowship. Today, there are thousands of interdenominational bodies—all the way from over 750 local Councils of Churches in the United States, through state and national Councils of Churches in two dozen lands, and uncounted other interdenominational bodies, up to the keystone of this intricate structure of Christian cooperation—the World Council of Churches which now embraces 150 national church bodies from 50 countries and which was brought into existence at Amsterdam a year ago last summer. In 1800, hardly one; in 1950, thousands. This is some measure of the actual achievements of Christian unity in the recent past.

These are some of the facts which led William Temple, the late Archbishop of Canterbury, to describe this "world-wide Christian fellowship," the modern ecumenical movement, as "the great new fact of our era . . . one great ground of hope for the coming days." These are among the facts which furnish a background for a

discussion of the question: "Is A United Church Possible Now?"

MR. BORIN: Miss Harkness, do you have anything to add to Dr. Van Dusen's statement?

MISS HARKNESS: I think that Mr. Van Dusen, who, by the way, is chairman of the Study Department of the World Council of Churches, has given us an excellent background for this discussion. I should like to point up a little more specifically a matter he eluded to, namely, the difference between church union, which means organic mergers and Christian unity. Church union comes slowly. It is a painful process at times. Christian unity we can have at once. In the words of a leader of early Congregationalism, "We can have now 'A Treatise of Reformation Without Tarrying for Any.'"

Ecumenical Movement

MR. BORIN: Van Dusen made reference to various church groups. What groups support the movement?

MR. MACY: He mentioned 150 denominations in 50 countries. It is interesting to know that 19 of these would be called Catholic churches but, as he said, they would not include some churches: the Roman Catholic, 13 Anglican, 11 Lutheran, and others. In the United States, for example, there are 22 Protestant and four Eastern Orthodox groups that work together in the Federal Council, but it includes 12 out of the 15 largest denominations in the country.

MR. BORIN: What groups oppose the movement?

MR. MACY: Well, in general, there are three. Not all of those that are outside are opposed to it, you understand. I wouldn't say the Roman Church is opposed to the movement. It is just not in it by virtue of its very self and its genius. But there are three groups that seem to give active opposition. One, I would say, is the economic conservative group composed of those who are misinformed and who confuse the church's rightful concern for social

welfare with the so-called ideologies of socialism and Communism.

Then there is a group of extreme fundamentalists, who feel they can't go along and would rather side in with this attack on the Council by virtue of thinking that it is a little left. But those are quite negated in a sense by the third group that opposes it, which are the Communist sympathizers who say that this movement is allied with economic imperialism.

MR. BORIN: You spoke of the Roman Catholic position. Does Church unity mean Protestant unity?

MR. MACY: Not to my mind. I am not interested in just Protestant unity. In fact, I am always a little irritated when they talk about this as a Protestant movement because it is wider than that.

MR. BORIN: When you speak of unity you include the Roman Catholic Church?

Include All Churches?

MR. MACY: I believe that God wills unity, and I have to believe that sometime it will include, if we ever get it—if we ever get real unity—the Roman Catholic Church. I don't see any way in which it can't.

MR. BORIN: Where do the Episcopalians stand on this question, Canon Bell?

CANON BELL: Before I answer that, I want to say that I think the relation of the Roman Catholic to this great movement is not nearly as closed as you might think, because the ecumenical movement has always held open the door. There can be no doubt that there is a great careful observation of what goes on in this movement on the part of all the leading Roman Catholic theologians in the world. They are concerned with it. They can't cooperate with it now; maybe they can never cooperate with it, but at any rate there is not opposition.

In regard to the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, this movement largely started under the leadership of the Anglican Commu-

ion. It started with the Chicago Quadrilateral adopted in Chicago by the Episcopal Church back in the 70's. I think it was the last century. Among the chief early leaders of the movement were Bishop Brent of the Philippine Islands, later Bishop of Western New York, and Archbishop William Temple. I suppose those two, with Archbishop Soderblom of the Swedish Church, really constituted the three great leaders of the movement. They brought it into being by their sheer faith and inspiration and gave it to other people to follow.

MR. BORIN: Then there are some very real bases for church unity?

Bases for Unity

CANON BELL: Of course there are but the thing is to find out what the basis is.

MR. BORIN: Mr. Thalassinos, what is the position of the Greek Orthodox Church?

MR. THALASSINOS: It seems to me that unity of the Church is one of the most ardent desires of the Eastern Orthodox Church. There is no religious service in the ritual without a special prayer for the unity of all. Nothing damages more the life of the Church than division and schism, and nothing manifests more clearly the bankruptcy of us Christians than the forgetfulness of Christian love. The Orthodox Church does not oppose the idea of the cooperation of the Christian churches throughout the world. It is the ecumenical patriarchate which already in 1920 proposed the creation of a world-wide society of the Christian churches, equivalent to the society of nations of that time. No attention was paid at that time to the initiative of the Greek Church, but subsequent history justified the expectation of the Patriarch of Constantinople.

MR. BORIN: You all seem to agree that there are certain very real advantages to church unity. I am moved to ask, are there any disadvantages in having a unified Church?

MISS HARKNESS: I don't think there

could possibly be any ultimate disadvantages. There are some barriers along the way in tradition and in conservatism. There are some factors to consider because, as we seek to cooperate, it may be that we have less time and energy for the work of our own church. But all those are inconsequential compared with the great advantages of our ultimate objective. As someone said a moment ago, we can have Christian unity and fellowship and worship in cooperative action.

Barriers to Unity

MR. BORIN: If I remember correctly, Van Dusen spoke in glowing language of church unity. I have just heard Miss Harkness talk about certain barriers. Canon Bell, are you as optimistic as Van Dusen about the prospects for church unity?

CANON BELL: I must confess, I don't think I am. Perhaps I misunderstand Dr. Van Dusen, but he seems to think that this is a great tidal wave and nothing can stop it. I think it might eventually be a tidal wave but it is not one yet for this reason: while people at the top of the movement understand perfectly its significance, the great rank and file of church people who belong to the various churches up and down the country do not understand it at all. And because they don't understand it, they are inclined to think either that church unity is impossible or else that it is too easy. Either one of those two is a bad idea.

We must avoid, it seems to me, an overoptimism and an overselling of our case. We have one of the greatest benefits to give to humanity that comes in the 20th century. We must be very careful that we make ourselves understood and make it plain what we mean by church unity, what we mean by cooperation.

MR. BORIN: What do we mean by church unity?

MISS HARKNESS: Church unity in the most effective, practical, next-step sense, means the ability to worship together and to work together; it means a sense of being one in Christ

Jesus; it means the ability to stick by the old dictum in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.

Varieties of Belief

CANON BELL: I agree with that, but perhaps we are apt not to see where the ordinary man thinks the essential begins and the non-essential stops. You see, as a matter of fact, there are great varieties of belief in the various churches and these beliefs are about very essential things: They are about who God is, and what God is; and who and what Christ is; and about the nature of man. Is he a sinner by fallen nature? Does he need redemption or can he save himself without divine intervention? Has God intervened in history? Is Christ, who is the Christian intervention, of the essence of God? Is he God? Or was he just a good man? Or what was he? And are the sacraments instruments whereby a present Christ gives divine help to Christians or are they just pretty ceremonies?

It is about such things that Christians, the rank and file of Christians, disagree. And we have them divided into all sorts of groups on the basis of what they deem real loyalties and real beliefs, and there are not only Catholics and Protestants that have to be reconciled but there are many varieties of Protestants. Of course, the Protestants are not all alike. As an Admiral in the Navy once said to me when I was to be a chaplain, "Don't make the mistake of supposing that Protestants are all alike, any more than the Mormon is the same as the Presbyterian in his belief and practices; or that the Episcopalians are the same as the Seventh Day Adventists, and New England's Congregationalist radically differs in kind from the Southern Baptist and Jehovah's Witness, or the Missouri Synod Lutheran. Protestants are not alike and aren't even theologically distant cousins.

MR. MACY: Canon Bell, I would agree. That is absolutely true, but the thing that impresses me very much in these great ecumenical movements, as rep-

resented by the World Council of Churches, is that the difficulties do not seem to be very much in basic belief as to God, to Christ, or to the Holy Spirit. In fact, Dr. Van Dusen suggests that in the last analysis, it is what ministers, preachers, clergymen, priests, think about themselves that matters.

'Laity Important'

CANON BELL: I deny that utterly. I think the important thing is what the laity think or don't think. It isn't so much the clergy misleading them.

MR. MACY: I meant the theologians and those who set doctrines.

MISS HARKNESS: About the nature of the Church, you mean?

MR. MACY: Yes, and the ministry. We are separated more about the ministry, the authority of the ministry, than any other thing.

CANON BELL: I don't know. I think we are disturbed a bit about the question whether we agree with one another as to who God is, and what He is, and why He is, and what Christ is, and that kind of thing. I think those are the things that really matter. Anyway, they divide us into groups. Some of us believe in the ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches with all our hearts and souls, but not because it is likely to bring about speedy church unity, because the leaders of this movement understand what the difficulties are. It is the people out in the field who don't always understand. It is very well that we should cooperate in good work, and it is very well that we should come to know and understand our likenesses and our differences, but organic unity is a long way off, and the movement must be very careful that it doesn't lead people to think it is around the corner.

MR. THALASSINOS: No unity of the Church is ever conceivable without the unity of faith. Love is the corollary of faith, as the Christian life as a whole derives from faith. To seek after love at the cost of faith is equivalent to

undermining the very foundation of love.

CANON BELL: I agree with that heartily. That is the whole point. The leaders of the movement understand that, and always have understood it from Bishop Brent today and Bishop Soderblom down. But the great rank and file of people out in the local districts are inclined to think that the movement will bring about a unity without unity of faith, and that, of course, cannot be.

Unity Without Uniformity

MR. MACY: Of course, we do emphasize the fact that the ecumenical movement really has two great arms. It is built upon the principle that we should act together in practical deeds of Christian love. We agree on this. Where we disagree we resolve to continue to love and try to understand one another.

MISS HARKNESS: What we are after is unity without uniformity. There is a great central cornerstone of unity in the doctrine of the incarnation to which the World Council of Churches is decidedly committed.

MR. BORIN: Do you think that today the problem of getting together and unifying for common action is the Church's first problem? Or is it more important to remedy the world's economic and social ills?

MR. MACY: I think back immediately, of course, to what was written of the Christians in the second century. There they were in a pagan and totalitarian empire and it was said that they were like the soul and the body holding the world together. I appreciate they weren't doing it perfectly, but they were tending to be a coordinating, a cohesive force. And therefore if we could get some kind of Christian unity today, it would be, in my judgment, a cohesive force.

MISS HARKNESS: I think we have empirical evidence that in the last war the churches, in a sense, did hold the world together. They were the one great unifying agency in a world that was torn asunder.

CANON BELL: I think if we look at the problem of church unity merely by asking ourselves if this is going to enable us to stave off a debacle, that we may as well admit that is not at all certain. Suppose the Christian churches were united and stood for the things that Christ stands for. All of those forces in the world which are against the things that Christ stands for—and they are tremendously powerful in every land and every culture—would turn on the united church and persecute it within an inch of its life.

MR. BORIN: But isn't the Church's great battle a battle against the evils of the world?

'Battle Against Evil'

CANON BELL: The battle against the evils not only in the world but the evils beyond the world.

MR. THALASSINOS: The real problem, it seems to me, is neither the economic problem nor the problem of church unity as such, but the problem of evil itself. Separation is the result of our sin and in order to fight division we should first of all fight against sin which provokes separation. There is no doubt at all that all mankind will meet at a common point. That is the point of the defeat of human sin and of the victory of the Kingdom of God.

MR. BORIN: You believe a unity of all churches will be an advantage in this world-wide fight?

MR. THALASSINOS: Evil has to be defeated first.

MR. BORIN: Not church unity first?

MR. THALASSINOS: Because the separation of churches is a result of our sin.

CANON BELL: Christian sin.

MR. MACY: Mr. Borin, one thing which was emphasized at the great gathering was that we would not unite without a reborn Church, without Christians who really become reborn Christians.

CANON BELL: Not a reborn Church,

but reborn Christians, because the Church is made up of Christians.

MR. BORIN: It is the old question, which came first, the chicken or the egg.

MISS HARKNESS: It is also true that it is only as the churches unite in fighting, not sin in general, but sins in particular, as the Christian forces unite to put down vindictiveness and hate and to further reconciliation and justice in the world, only so can we either defeat evil in the world or the Church be reborn.

MR. BORIN: You think church unity is crucial in doing this?

MISS HARKNESS: I think it is a very real possibility in functional activities.

MR. BORIN: What practical steps, then, should be taken to achieve church unity?

MISS HARKNESS: First of all, we must learn to worship together. There are problems, of course, in reference to the sacraments. We needn't be too discouraged if we don't have complete intercommunion immediately but we can worship together in humbling ourselves before the one God of us all, and pledging our allegiance to the one Lord, Jesus Christ. We can have fellowship and understanding with one another. We can do a great deal in the field of cooperative action, religious education, missions, youth work, the social procedures we were speaking of a moment ago. And basically, perhaps, we can learn to understand our faith so that we know both the differences and the great agreements.

'Need for Prayer'

MR. MACY: One thing we need is the kind of spirit that is manifested by some of our great ecumenical leaders. Bishop Fjellbu of Norway, when he was in this country had this to say: "I think that the most beautiful instrument in the symphony orchestra is the cello, and I am quite sure that in the orchestra of God the Lutherans are going to play the cellos. But I am just as sure that the cello can't play a symphony, and in the orchestra

of God some churches are just going to play the drums."

CANON BELL: I should like to suggest one thing we can do about this which I don't think we quite suggested although I am sure it was in all our minds. We had better do some praying about it, for the will of God and the power of God released through prayer can break down the barriers of division and hate between Christians. If people pray together, or pray separately for the common end, they are united with God and with one another in the way that nothing else can unite them.

MR. BORIN: Even in this era of hope, I can't help but feel a little pessimistic about the Church's chances of conquering evil. When I look at the disputes between labor and management, when I look at housing and food conditions the world over, and especially when I look at the H-bomb, I feel that there is not much room for optimism and hope and prayer.

MISS HARKNESS: There isn't any room for a superficial optimism, although I don't think we are defeated. The worst thing would be to surrender in despair. Even if the hydrogen bomb

destroys human life on this planet God would not be defeated. It is the heart of the Easter message that God has an eternal Kingdom beyond this earth.

CANON BELL: It is indeed. It is the heart of God's message for individuals. As the Bishop of Chicago once said to us not long ago: "After all, why are we so afraid of the hydrogen bomb, merely because it is going to kill us—because we are going to die? We all know we are going to die, individually or collectively. What is the difference? It is whether we have a faith that transcends death that will enable us to face the hydrogen bomb."

MR. BORIN: By evaluating the progress of the movement for a united Church, it seems to me that you people have dealt with one of the most practical problems faced by Christianity today. In our informative discussion you have presented the advantages and disadvantages of church unity; you have revealed the obstacles faced by those who fight today for a unified Christianity; you have set forth, it seems to me, a practical plan by which church unity might be achieved.



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Suggested Readings



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Library, Northwestern University



BROWN, W. A. *Toward a United Church; Three Decades of Ecumenical Christianity*. New York, Scribner's, 1946.

"A history and an interpretation of the Ecumenical Movement from the Edinburgh Conference of 1910 to the organization of the World Council of Churches."

DUN, ANGUS. *Prospecting for a United Church*. New York, Harpers, 1948.

The addresses, delivered in 1946 by the Episcopal bishop of Washington, which inaugurated the Hoover Lectures on church unity given at the University of Chicago.

HARKNESS, GEORGIA. *Gospel and Our World* (Based on three addresses prepared for the E. T. Earle Lectureship, Pacific School of Religion). New York, Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949.

"A terse and sinewy analysis of Methodism in the United States with emphasis on constructive evangelism."

JUSTUS, KARL B. *What's Wrong with Religion?* New York, Essential Books, 1946.

The author, a chaplain in World War II, studies the lack of unity in the church today with the idea of promoting better understanding.

NEWBIGIN, J. E. LESSLIE. *Reunion of the Church; A Defense of the South India Scheme*. New York, Harper's, 1948.

Explains and defends the Church of South India which came into existence in 1947, and includes Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, etc.

SCOTFORD, JOHN RYLAND. *Church Union: Why Not?* Boston, Pilgrim Press, 1948.

Based on the premise that the "man in the congregation" wants church union. Describes the main obstacles as being theological, organizational, social and institutional, and tells why none is too great to be overcome.

VAN DUSEN, HENRY PITNEY. *World Christianity, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*. New York, Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943.

Summarizes the kinds of cooperation existing among churches today, and stresses the movements toward unity which have occurred since the late nineteenth century.

American Magazine 145:30-1+, Je., '48. "Too Many Churches." N. V. PEALE.

Denouncing "petty denominational differences, prejudices, and snobbery," declares that the Protestant churches can and should unite.

Atlantic Monthly 177:52-7, Ja., '46. "What About Church Unity?" B. I. BELL.

Points out that the real division in Christianity today is between fundamentalists and modernists, not between Protestants and Catholics. Maintains that if the churches are to really help in the solution of current confusion, they must first resolve this vertical unity.

Christendom 12, no. 2:165-76, '47. "Conflicting Interchurch Movements in American Protestantism." H. S. SMITH.

Describes the interchurch movements which, looking upon themselves as defenders of "evangelical" faith, are opposed to the modernists represented by such groups as the Federal Council of Churches of Christ.

Christendom 11, no. 3:327-40, '46. "Issues of Christian Unity." H. P. VAN DUSEN.

Noting the progress in theoretical agreement in the past hundred and fifty years, examines the main obstacles in the way of unity, and urges that the initial goal for unity should be, not church union, but mutual recognition.

Christendom 12, no. 3:328-40, '47. "Twenty Years Since Lausanne; A Personal Witness to the Movement for Christian Unity." E. STEBBINS.

Describes the Ecumenical Movement from the close of the first World Conference on Faith and Order held in Lausanne in 1927.

Christian Century 67:166-7, F. S., '50. "Court Rules Against Merger."

A discussion of the "most important court decision bearing on a religious issue since the Supreme Court on released time . . .," the decision of the New York State Supreme Court with regard to the proposed merger of the Congregational-Christian with the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

Christian Century 67:42-5, Ja. 11, '50. "Ecumenical United Church." C. C. MORRISON.

A plan for union offered at the Conference on Church Union held in Greenwich, Connecticut, December 14-16, 1949.

Christian Century 65:136-7, F. 4, '48. "Federal Union Is Not Enough." T. B. DOUGLASS.

Maintains that schemes of federal union do not deal drastically enough with the denominational system, and that corporate union must remain the ideal.

Christian Century 65:1233-35, 1270-72, 1297-99, N. 17, N. 24, D. 1, '48. "The Less Excellent Way." JOSEPH R. WALKER.

A series of three articles on denominationalism in America. Declares that denominationalism can be eradicated and union achieved, that only the will to unite is lacking.

Christian Century 67:138-40, F. 1, '50. "Is Federal Union Organic Union?" E. S. JONES.

An outstanding proponent of Christian unity submits a plan which would result in one united church, the "Church of Christ in America."

Christian Century 65:1043-96, O. 6, '48.

Issue devoted to the "Amsterdam World Assembly of Churches." Contains a "retrospective report on an epochal gathering and evaluation of the permanent importance of the actions taken at the first session of the World Council of Churches."

Forum 109:207-11, Ap., '48. "Church Union Now?" E. RITTER.

A terse report on the present status of the Ecumenical Movement, with an historical resume of Christian disunity in Europe and America.

Nineteenth Century 144:202-7, O., '48. "Some Reflections on the Amsterdam Assmby." D. R. DAVIES.

Maintains that while the Amsterdam Assembly dissolved the vision of a "super church," it produced a fellowship of spirit which "contains a promise, not only for the Churches, but also for secular civilization."

Review of Religion 9:361-6, My., '45. "Pluralistic Christianity." T. ORGAN.

Declares that tolerance is needed rather than unity.

Saturday Evening Post 221:25+, D. 4, '48. "Can He Unite the Protestants?" H. SPENCE.

Describes the work of the Reverend E. Stanley Jones, outstanding crusader for unified Protestantism.



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